M. Ziauddin

Debate on Sindh continues

THE debate on the Sindh situation resumed in the National Assembly on Thursday. But before that, the opposition minus the MQM staged a walkout protesting against, what it termed, the inadequate explanation by the food and agriculture minister, Abdus Sattar Lalika, about atta shortage in the NWFP. Both Asfandyar Wali Khan and Haji Bilour of the ANP accused Lalika of not coming to grips with the real issue and instead trying to hide behind irrelevant statistics. The disagreement had followed a call attention notice by the ANP members on the issue.

Arif Khan of the MQM reopened the debate on the Sindh situation and like his party colleagues he, too, spoke for about five minutes but without making much sense. Gen Majid Malik, who defended the government actions in that province, was equally short on logic and long on reproof. The speeches made so far from either side (MQM and the government) have failed to establish either the complicity or the innocence of the MQM in the pre-governor rule violence and crime in Sindh.

However, Mir Hazar Khan Bijarani of PPP(SB) delivered a highly persuasive speech. Very aptly he recalled the Tando Bahawal killings in 1992 to question the misplaced over-confidence of the government in the military courts. He asked the government to explain the real status of the Sindh assembly as it had been neither suspended nor dissolved. He also brought into question the very justification the government had used to bring to an end the democratic process in Sindh. The PPP(SB) leader made it all look like an after-thought. A frame-up. Only three members could speak on the subject on Thursday. The debate is expected to continue until all the remaining 14 have spoken.

Naveed Qamar of the PPP was understandably agitated at not finding on Thursday's order of the day the privilege motion the opposition had moved on Wednesday against the offloading of Benazir Bhutto from a Dubai-bound plane on Monday. The speaker had deferred the discussion on the admissibility of the motion by a day on Wednesday. The speaker was not there to explain his position. He had already left his seat before the issue was agitated by the PPP. The deputy speaker, Jafar Iqbal, who was in the chair, agreed with Naveed Qamar that as a matter of rule Thursday's order of the day should have included the privilege motion. He promised to look into the matter.

The government seems to have landed itself in a box in the matter of Ms Bhutto's offloading. Some government minions had admitted in an interview to a foreign radio station that the administration had offloaded her because it was expecting the courts to give verdicts in a day or two in some of the cases of alleged corruption she was facing. Another reason given for this extraordinary action was that her absence from the country would cause unnecessary delays in the hearing of the cases, some of which were coming to a close.

But the courts by allowing her to go abroad have given a lie to both these reasons. When opposing the admissibility of the privilege motion the government will have to come up with a more plausible defence than the argument that since she has been allowed to go out of the country the motion has become infructuous. Therefore, the government's reluctance on Thursday to allow the motion to come up for discussion, perhaps. It would be interesting to see how the government would try to extricate itself from the box on Friday.

Since not much was happening inside the hall, the corridors and the lobbies became more interesting. And the most popular question on everybody's lips there was: Why did they offload her when the courts had not barred her from travelling abroad? Perhaps to give the opposition one more handle to beat the government with? But some others had a more ridiculous explanation: The government was testing the waters to gauge the reaction of PPP workers at large. Preparing to arrest her, finally? To disqualify her, perhaps?

Parliament grapevine has it that her partners in the PAI have started putting pressure on Ms Bhutto to come to some understanding with them on seat distribution in the next elections, which they are expecting to be held soon. Their own demand: 75 seats with the following break-up: 50 for Tahirul Qadri's Minhajul Quran, 10 each for PML (Chattha) and Aslam Beg's Awami Qiadat, five for PML (Q) and two for Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan. Ms Bhutto so far is said to have resisted this demand and instead has promised to make seat adjustments at the time of elections. The PAI partners are also said to have asked the PPP to give a public undertaking that when and if the alliance won the next elections, the government would be called that of PAI's and not of the PPP's.